

GDC 2003 – Freelancers’ Roundtable Moderator’s Report

Freelancers’ Roundtable – Summary

Moderator: François Dominic Laramée, francoislaramee@videotron.ca

In its third year at GDC, this roundtable gathered freelance designers, programmers, artists, audio specialists and also the people who employ them. Participants swapped marketing techniques, tricks on how to set their rates and manage their client bases, and their thoughts on the ever-fluctuating status of the freelancer in the game development community.

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A total of about 25 people attended the three sessions of the Freelancers’ Roundtable this year, a significant decrease compared to 2002. The fact that another roundtable featured a somewhat similar topic (“how to consult in the game industry”) probably explains part of the drop, as does the conference’s price tag, which is out of the reach of all but the most successful among the self-employed.

Overall, the participants were divided into three categories:

- Active freelancers
- Developers who would like to switch to the freelance lifestyle
- Studio managers and producers who were seeking contractors to hire. (Those were quite welcome.)

Most of the discussion revolved around questions from the would-be freelancers, who were seeking tips on how to make the transition as painless as possible, and on the current state of the industry from a freelance point of view. Some of the highlights included:

- Several of the active freelancers complete their income with work outside of the game industry.
- The number of freelancers has increased in recent years, with many of the new arrivals competing for assignments by undercutting the competition’s prices just to get the contracts. Combined with the large number of recently laid-off employees looking for work, the market is oversaturated.
- As projects get bigger and longer, it is even more difficult to convince studios to hire contractors rather than full-time employees. Everyone around the table agrees that a specialist that comes in for a short period of time to write AI

code, tweak the design, etc., would be cost-effective, but there is still considerable reluctance on the part of the studios to adopt this kind of business model. Fear of a loss of control seems to be the dominant factor.

- The typical freelancer works for 5-6 clients a year, on projects that last 3-4 months each. Thus, juggling 2-3 projects at once is the norm rather than the exception.
- One way to distinguish yourself from the competition (and from full-time staff) is to “get off the bleeding edge” and specialize in niche areas that don’t attract much attention. Older technologies are good candidates. Another one is to be as versatile as possible and gather assignments of various types and durations.
- The only way to ensure long-term success is to build many trusting relationships with people who are in a position to hire freelancers: senior producers, project managers, etc. “Companies don’t hire; people do.” Few methods beyond personal networking seem to work reliably as sources of assignments.
- Agreeing to a fixed price ahead of time, instead of a hourly rate, is rarely a good idea, because the client has every incentive to try to extract more out of the contract than they are paying for. However, accepting a lower hourly rate in exchange for better deadlines can help a struggling client and also makes balancing the freelancer’s workload easier.
- The seasoned freelancers around the table base their hourly rate on an expectation of 800 to 1,200 billable hours per year at the most.
- Finally, there is apparently no really effective registry of contract opportunities, freelancers and studio contacts anywhere on the web; most of the projects posted on Gamasutra, for example, are looking for people willing to work for no pay or for future royalties only. The upcoming “Game Developer’s Market” book(s) may help alleviate this problem.